

November 28, 2012

Michigan House of Representatives: Education Committee

Re: House Bill 6004

Submitted by: Elizabeth Welch Lykins, East Grand Rapids, Michigan

I am here today as a suburban mom from one of the best districts in the State who is deeply concerned about the so-called reform agenda being put forward by members of this committee. While I realize the topic today is HB 6004 (the vast expansion of the Education Achievement Authority), we all know that this is merely Step 1 of an agenda to vastly expand the reach of charter and cyber schools, ending with a massive raid on taxpayer dollars in every school district in this state. The end result will be a massive transfer of resources to for-profit entities, many of whom have no track record or even a poor track record. It is not acceptable to use our children as guinea pigs for a grand experiment that in many cases has already been proven to not work.

I am here because I am a proud product of our public schools. I had excellent support and a well-rounded education that prepared me for the honors program at my university and eventually a competitive law school where I was surrounded by many privately educated students. I benefitted from early intervention in reading in elementary school and eventually went on to become a top editor of my law journal. I competed with other students every day because of the excellent preparation I had. I simply want the same option for all the children in our state. The agenda you are putting forth will not make more competitive students. While schools may compete for the students, there is no guarantee that the curriculum they will be following will in fact make the students themselves competitive. What it will do is slowly bleed out our traditional public schools and destroy our communities (as well as real estate values). Children who grow into adults now return to many communities across our state because they want their children to have a great education as well as grow up with a sense of community (something lacking in many areas of the country). All of the legislation you are proposing regarding school reform ends communities. Our voters are keenly aware of that where I live.

Schools all over this state have been dealt crushing blows by Lansing. They have had to adapt to massive changes and restructuring. This new legislation doesn't even give any district a chance to breathe and see if the changes are working. Grand Rapids Public, a district which I care deeply about since it is right next door to our District and our communities are deeply connected, has just finished a massive restructuring plan that will undoubtedly make them competitive and excellent on many fronts. They have many programs that are award-winning and working well. They have a massive partnership with the private and nonprofit sector at one school that will ensure that the kids get to college despite severe obstacles. They plan to expand those programs and reach more students. The changes you are proposing will just deplete more funding from their schools and most certainly end many of the positive changes they have worked hard to make. The cycle is vicious and will simply end with charter schools gaining more and more of the pie despite no evidence that the results are any better.

The Education Achievement Authority is the beginning of the “slippery slope.” There is no secret about where this is headed at this point. The EAA will take over districts and turn them over to charter schools to operate them (despite the data showing no difference in overall outcomes between charter and traditional schools). The EAA will have little oversight and zero accountability under any elected officials other than the Governor. While all the other school districts in the state will be expected to abide by strict new rules and testing requirements, we are learning that the EAA may be exempt from the very requirements that are supposed to be making our traditional public schools better.

I continually hear from members of this Committee that the “free market” needs to govern education decisions. I find that appalling when this proposed legislation would actually require a school district that shutter a building due to consolidation to maintain the building in an “education ready” state. There is absolutely nothing in the capitalist world we live in that would require this. If a business consolidates and closes a factory, it is most certainly would not be required to maintain the building so that a competitor can move in. The issue is all the more offensive when one considers that the building belongs 100% to the local taxpayers (who to this day still pay for the buildings in their communities). This lack of fairness has been a consistent policy the last two years. While charter schools do not have to pay for transportation or mandatory retirement contributions and notoriously steer special education students back to the traditional public schools, the traditional public schools are left with everything that is expensive (including high school). This is not a “free market”—it is a market designed to favor one entity heavily over another with an agenda to drive the other out of business. The EAA would clearly just expand this extreme unfairness all over the state into districts everywhere.

While I am not yet on the School Board, I recently won a tough race and will be privileged to be serving our District in 2013. I knocked on every voter’s door in the district. The number one issue I campaigned on was the irresponsibility of Lansing towards our schools. The voters responded by electing me by a large margin. The message resonated. They are angry that Lansing continues to take more and more of their local control away from entities their tax dollars are supposed to support. Parents in our district are deeply alarmed at the changes that will dismantle our public schools. They are paying attention and, I assure you, they do vote and have many friends in other districts who vote too. I think it is critical for you to hear that we expect better and smarter use of our tax dollars.

I urge you to seriously consider the ramifications of such expanded powers granted to the EAA. At least take more time to be thoughtful and make sure the playing field is level for all education institutions in this state before enacting such sweeping changes. Right now, the deck is stacked dramatically against our traditional public schools. Thank you.